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APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT

SPECIFICATION

TO ALL WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

Be it known that Rhonda Sue Johnson

a citizen of the UNITED STATES, residing at 4 Lexington Drive, Vernon Hills

in the County of Lake and State of Illinois

has invented a new and useful **SOFT-SIDED COOLER OR LUNCH KIT WITH QUICK ACCESS FLAP DEFINING A DECORATIVE FIGURE**

of which the following is a specification.

SOFT-SIDED COOLER OR LUNCH KIT WITH QUICK ACCESS FLAP DEFINING A DECORATIVE FIGURE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to insulated containers typically employed for the transport of food or beverages and in more particular application to such containers that are insulated to transport food or beverages in either a heated or a cooled state and generally referred to as coolers.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Insulated containers for transporting food and/or beverages in a heated or cooled state have long been known. Originally, rigid containers with insulated walls and pivoted lids were employed for the purpose. Indeed, such rigid coolers are still employed today for many purposes.

More recent years have seen the development of so-called "soft-sided coolers" which typically are not as bulky as rigid-sided coolers but in some instances may approach the size thereof. Soft-sided coolers are frequently provided with carrying straps and offer the advantage that when carried by the carrying strap, the user of the cooler is in contact with a relatively soft-sided cooler to make carrying more comfortable. Moreover, in soft-sided coolers by their very nature are partially collapsible and therefore are more readily stored by the user when not in use and are more easily transported by the manufacturer to a point of sale and/or maintained in inventory by a merchandiser of the cooler.

As a consequence of these attributes, soft-sided coolers have become quite popular and their use has proliferated accordingly. One form of soft-sided coolers is provided to replace conventional hard sided lunch boxes in a size appropriate for use to pack a meal for an individual, for example lunch, and are commonly referred to as soft-sided lunch kits or bags.

A typical soft-sided cooler is usually, but not always, in the form of a rectangular solid having an insulated, pliable bottom wall, an upstanding, insulated pliable side wall and a pliable top panel which also is insulated. In the usual case, the vast majority of the side wall is attached to the bottom wall while a short, upper section of the side wall is attached to and depends from the periphery of the top panel. Around the remaining three sides, a zipper or other securing device extends which may be closed to secure the top panel in a closed state to the side wall. When the zipper is opened about three sides, the top panel (and that small portion of the side wall secured to the top panel) may be pivoted away from a loading/unloading opening near the upper part of the side wall through which items to be transported may be introduced into or taken from the interior of the cooler.

This sort of structure is highly desirable in that it allows the top panel to be pivoted away from the remainder to the cooler to expose an access opening that is essentially the same size as the bottom panel, thereby allowing easy introduction or removal of the materials to be transported in the cooler. However, it is not without a drawback. In particular, when only one or two items of many contained within the cooler are to be removed therefrom, the zipper must be moved about three sides of the

cooler to achieve access to the interior. After removal, the zipper must be re-zipped. This requires more effort than is desired when only a single or a few of the items contained in the cooler are to be accessed.

To solve this problem, the assignee of the instant application introduced an improvement wherein the top panel itself was provided with a much smaller quick access opening that is closed by a flap forming part of the top panel and which carries a body of insulation sufficiently large so as to close the quick access opening. A quick release securing device as, for example, Velcro® fastener is employed to secure the flap to the remainder of the top panel at a point opposite that whereat the flap is hinged to the remainder of the top panel. While this solution works well for its intended purpose, there is always room for improvement.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

It is a principal object of the invention to provide a new and improved portable cooler as, for example, a soft-sided cooler or lunch kit.

In accordance with one aspect of the invention, a soft-sided lunch kit or cooler is provided and includes a body, a pliable top panel, and a quick access structure. The body includes a pliable bottom wall, and a pliable side wall joined to and extending in upstanding-fashion about the periphery of the bottom wall. The side wall includes an upper loading/unloading access opening to the interior of the body. The pliable top panel is sized to close the loading/unloading access opening and hinged to the body to be movable between positions opening and closing the loading/unloading access opening. The quick access structure includes a quick access opening in the top panel, and a flap hinged to the top panel to

be movable between positions opening and closing the quick access opening. An exterior side of the top panel has a decorative figure formed thereon, and the flap defines a portion of the decorative figure.

In one aspect, the flap has a periphery shaped to resemble at least a part of the portion of the decorative figure.

In accordance with one aspect, the cooler or lunch kit further includes a zipper-like closing device extending about the loading/unloading access opening and a periphery of the top panel for selectively securing the top panel in a position closing the loading/unloading access opening.

According to one aspect, the flap includes an opening tab extending from the flap to overlay a surface of the exterior of the top panel, and the opening tab defines part of the portion of the decorative figure.

In one aspect, the pliable bottom wall, pliable side wall, pliable top panel and flap are all thermally insulated.

According to one aspect, the decorative figure is in the form of an animal or car and the portion of the decorative figure comprises the lower jaw of the animal or hood of the car. In a further aspect, the flap includes an opening tab extending from the flap to overlay a surface of the exterior of the top panel, and the opening tab defines part of the portion of the decorative figure, with the part of the portion of the decorative figure including a tooth or lip of the animal or a grill of the car.

In accordance with one aspect of the invention, a soft-sided lunch kit is provided and includes a pliable body surrounding storage compartment having a loading/unloading access opening, a lid connected to the body and sized to close the loading/unloading access opening with the lid in a closed position, and a flap connected to the lid to be movable

between positions opening and closing the quick access opening in the lid. The lid includes a quick access opening therein to allow access to the storage compartment with the lid in the closed position. An exterior of the lid has a decorative figure formed thereon, and the flap defines a portion of the decorative figure.

In one aspect, the pliable body is thermally insulated. In one aspect, the pliable body and the lid are thermally insulated. In one aspect, the pliable body, the lid, and the flap are thermally insulated.

According to one aspect, the lid is pliable.

In accordance with one aspect, the lid and the flap are pliable.

In one aspect, the flap includes an opening tab extending from the flap to overlay a surface of the exterior of the lid, with the opening tab defining part of the portion of the decorative figure.

In one aspect, the flap has a periphery shaped to resemble at least a part of the portion of the decorative figure.

In accordance with one aspect, the lunch kit further includes a zipper-like closing device extending about the loading/unloading access opening and a periphery of the lid for selectively securing the lid in a position closing the loading/unloading access opening.

In one aspect, the quick access opening allows access to an additional storage compartment carried on an interior side of the top panel.

Other objects and advantages will become apparent from the following specification taken in connection with the accompanying drawings.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Fig. 1 is a top view of one embodiment of a soft-sided cooler/lunch kit embodying the invention showing a top panel and a flap both in closed positions;

Fig. 2 is a top view of the soft-sided colorfast Fig. 1 illustrating the top panel in a closed position but with the flap moved to an open position;

Fig. 3 is a top perspective view showing the flap in a closed position and the top panel in an open position;

Figs. 4-6 are similar to Figs. 1-3, respectively, but illustrate another embodiment of a soft-sided cooler/lunch kit embodying the invention; and

Figs. 7 and 8 are similar to Figs. 1 and 2, but show yet another embodiment of a soft-sided cooler/lunch kit embodying the invention.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

With reference to Figs. 1-3, a preferred embodiment of a soft-sided cooler made according to the invention is illustrated in the form of lunch-kit. The soft-sided cooler includes a body, generally designated 10, that surrounds a storage compartment 11 defined by the interior of the body 10. As is apparent from Figs. 1 and 2, the body 10 is in the form of a rectangular solid. However, other shapes may be employed as well. For example, a cylindrical shape could be employed if desired as could a number of other geometric configurations.

In any event, the body 10 includes a pliable, insulated bottom wall 12. A rectangular side wall 14 of insulated pliable material extends

upwardly from the bottom wall 12 and, near its upper end, includes an access opening, generally designated 16. The access opening 16 is for unloading or loading the cooler and can be closed by a top panel 18 which is secured to a rear section 20 of the side wall 14 for pivoting between positions opening and closing the access opening 16 by a hinge 21, typically fabric but which can be of any suitable form such as a tape hinge or as by stitching the panel 18 to the wall 14. The periphery of the top panel 18 defines its envelope and in many instances, a short skirt 22 depends from the top panel 18 in alignment with the side wall 14 to form a continuation thereof. A conventional zipper 24 may be utilized to secure the panel 18 or the skirt 22 to the side wall 14 so that the top panel 18 closes the interior of the cooler body 10. The zipper 24 may be opened to allow the top panel 18 to be pivoted from a closed position shown in Figs. 1 and 2 to an open position shown in Fig. 3 exposing the loading/unloading access opening 16.

Preferably, the top panel 18 is also insulated and made of a pliable material. In the usual case, a sandwiched construction will be utilized for the walls 12 and 14 as well as the top panel 18 wherein the exterior part of each wall is formed of a fabric and the interior part formed of a liquid impervious plastic or the like. Suitable insulating fiber of a flexible nature is located between the two panels in a manner known in the art.

The top panel 18 has a decorative figure 25 formed thereon, which in the embodiment of Fig. 1 is a character figure in the form of a dog. It should be understood that any decorative figure can be used for the figure 25, such as for example, other types of animals, cartoon characters,

landscapes, portraits, buildings, abstract figures, etc. In this regard, Fig. 4 shows an alternate embodiment wherein the decorative figure 25 is in the form of a race car, and Fig. 7 shows an alternate embodiment wherein the decorative figure 25 is in the form of a frog.

The top panel 18 also includes a quick access flap 26 which is shown in a closed position in Fig. 1 and in an open position in Fig. 2. The flap 26 is hinged at 28 to the remainder of the top panel 18 using any suitable means, such as a fabric hinge, a tape hinge, or as by stitching the fabric of which the flap 26 may be formed to the fabric on the exterior of the top panel 18 at the location 28. This allows the flap 26 to move between a closed position, as shown in Fig. 1, and an open position, as shown in Fig. 2, to close and open a rectangular quick access opening 30 which will be typically sized so that one may insert one's hand into the storage compartment 11 through the quick access opening 30 to retrieve a beverage or a sandwich or the like when the flap 26 is in the open position shown in Fig. 2. Shapes other than rectangular ones could also be employed in forming the opening 30. For example, the embodiment of Fig. 5 has a parallelogram-shaped opening 30, and the embodiment of Fig. 8 has an oval-shaped opening 30. Together, the flap 26 and the opening 30 define a quick access structure 31.

As best seen in Fig. 1, the flap 26 defines a portion 32 of the decorative figure 25, with the portion 32 in the embodiment of Fig. 1 being in the form of the lower jaw of the dog. It should be understood that the particular portion 32 of the decorative figure 25 defined by the flap 26 will be highly dependent upon the particular decorative figure used. For example, the portion 32 in the embodiment of Figs. 4 and 5 is in the form of the

hood of the car, the portion 32 of the embodiment of Figs. 7 and 8 is in the form of the lower jaw of the frog. Preferably, an outer periphery 33 of the flap 26 defines at least part of the portion 32. For example, as best seen in Fig. 2, the periphery 33 defines the outline of the lower jaw of the dog including the teeth associated with the lower jaw. As further examples, the outer periphery 33 of the flap 26 of the embodiment of Figs. 4 and 5 defines the outline of the hood of the car, and the periphery 33 of the flap 26 of the embodiment of Figs. 7 and 8 define the outline of the lower jaw of the frog. Additionally, as best seen in Figs. 2 and 5, it may be desirable for at least part of the panel 18 that underlies the flap 26 to include a reproduction of at least a part of the portion 32 defined by the flap 26. However, in some embodiments this might not be desired, as shown for the embodiment of Fig. 8.

Preferably, the flap 26 is pliable and is also preferably insulated using the same type of construction as described for the wall 14 and panel 18. As an alternative to, or in addition to being pliable and/or insulated, the flap 26 can carry a small, rectangular body (not shown) of insulating material which is sized to approximately the same size and shape as the quick access opening 30. This block may extend into the quick access opening 30 if desired or, in the alternative, may be sized so as to abut the edges of the access opening 30 to form a gross seal thereat.

Preferably, a quick release fastener 34, such as a hook and loop type fastener or Velcro® patch, may be located adjacent the access opening 30 at a location remote from the hinge line 28. A mating patch 35 is located on the flap 26 so as to engage with the patch 34 to hold the flap 26 in a closed position when desired. Other suitable quick release

fasteners, such as buttons or snaps, may be used in place of a hook and loop type fastener.

The flap 26 preferably includes at least one tab 36 which is intended to be gripped by a user of cooler when the user desires to achieve access to the interior of the cooler body 10 through the quick access opening 30 by gripping the tab 36 to release the fastener 34 and move the flap 26 to the open position. In the embodiment of Fig. 1, two tabs 36 are provided, each in the form of a tooth extending upward from the lower jaw of the dog. It should be appreciated that the tab(s) 36 can take many forms. For example, the tab 36 of the embodiment of Figs. 4 and 5 is provided in the form of a grill structure attached to the hood of the car, and the tab 36 in the embodiment of Figs. 7 and 8 is provided in the form of a junction between a lip and a perimeter of the jaw of the frog. Preferably, the tab(s) 36 extends away from the hinge line 28.

One possible alternative for the quick access structure 31 is best seen in Figs. 5 and 6 wherein the quick access opening 30 allows access to an additional storage compartment 38 that is formed on the interior side of the top panel 18, extending into the storage compartment 11. Preferably, the additional storage compartment 38 is formed of the same type of pliable materials used in forming the wall 14, panel 18 and flap 26, and is attached to the top panel 18 using any suitable means, which in the illustrated embodiment is by sewing. The additional storage compartment 38 can be used to store food, particularly when the soft-sided cooler is a lunch kit as in the illustrated embodiments, but can also be used to store any other item desired, such as a toy, money, or key ring. Preferably, the additional storage compartment 38 has a shape that corresponds

to the shape of the access opening 30. In this regard, it can be seen that the additional storage compartment of Figs. 5 and 6 has a parallelogram shape similar to the parallelogram shape of the access opening 30, and the storage compartment 38 of Fig. 8 has an oval shape similar to the oval shape of the access opening 30 in Fig. 8. However, in some applications, it may be desirable for the additional storage compartment 30 to have a shape that does not conform to the shape of the access opening 30.

The decorative figure 25 can be formed on the panel 18 and flap 26 using any suitable method, which in the illustrated embodiments is colored printing on the surfaces of the panel 18 and flap 26, but which can include, without limitation, painting, silk screening, embroidering, stitching, weaving, sculpting, etc.

The body 10 can be provided with a flexible carrying strap 40 secured to the side wall 14 at spaced locations thereon near the upper end thereof.